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CBF General Assembly to feature Jimmy Carter

By David Wilkinson

ATLANTA (ABP) -- Former President Jimmy Carter, arguably the world's best-known Baptist layperson, is scheduled as a keynote speaker at Cooperative Baptist Fellowship's 2001 General Assembly, June 28-30, in Atlanta.

Carter, 76, who spoke at the 1993 General Assembly in Birmingham, will recount his personal journey as a follower of Christ during the June 29 evening session.

The three-day gathering at the Georgia World Congress Center begins with the first series of workshops at 2 p.m. on June 28. The event will offer a blend of worship, learning and fellowship based on the theme of "Following Jesus." Each general session will include a collaborative theme interpretation presented by musical artist Kyle Matthews and Furman University professor Jeff Rogers.

Dallas pastor George Mason will speak at the first general session the evening of June 28. A speaker for Saturday's closing session has not been confirmed.

CBF Moderator Donna Forrester, minister of pastoral care and counseling at First Baptist Church, Greenville, S.C., will preside at business sessions.

Participants also will commemorate the Fellowship's 10th anniversary, including a "Decade of Promise" banquet on Wednesday evening and an assembly-wide reception following the Thursday evening session. CBF was officially organized as a national network of Baptist churches and Christians in May 1991 in Atlanta.

Other highlights of the meeting include:

-- As many as 100 workshops, with an emphasis on congregational ministries within the four "strategic initiatives" of CBF's strategic plan: community building, faith formation, global missions and leadership development.

-- A Congregational Leadership Institute, designed for lay and clergy leaders. Themed, "Being Good News People in a Bad News World," it features Thomas Bandy as keynoter. The one-day workshop on effective approaches to evangelism also includes breakout sessions led by leadership teams from churches in different contexts.

-- A resource fair with more than 80 exhibitors offering a variety of resources and services to churches. In addition to two major bookstores, the fair will include a "missions marketplace" featuring handcrafted items from around the world and information about the unreached-people groups they represent.

-- Business items, including election of officers, adoption of CBF's mission and ministries budget for 2001-02, and consideration of a series of recommendations emerging from a strategic planning team.

-- Commissioning of new CBF missionaries.

-- Simultaneous Children's Assembly and youth activities.

-- State and regional CBF gatherings.

-- Dozens of auxiliary events sponsored by CBF ministry partners.

There is no registration fee for the assembly, although some related services and events (such as the Leadership Institute and programs for children and youth) require pre-registration and fees. Many auxiliary events will also require reservations.

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EDITOR'S NOTE: Additional information is available on CBF's Web site at www.cbfonline.org.

Anti-abortion advocates push restrictions on RU-486

By Kenny Byrd

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- With a new president who supports limits on abortion rights, opponents of the drug RU-486 are pushing for tighter restrictions on doctors' ability to distribute the controversial pill.

Under legislation recently introduced by GOP lawmakers, physicians would have to meet several new standards to legally prescribe the drug, also known as mifepristone, which recently won approval by the Food and Drug Administration.

President George W. Bush opposes abortion with some exceptions. He criticized the FDA's approval of RU-486 during the campaign but said the president lacks authority to overturn the decision.

A Bush aide has said, however, that the president would support legislation restricting distribution of the pill.

Abortion-rights groups contend the bill is aimed at limiting women's access to RU-486 by restricting who prescribes it and where it can be prescribed. "Claims that this legislation is motivated by a concern for women's health are at best disingenuous and at worst dishonest," said Vicki Saporta, executive director of the National Abortion Federation, in wire reports.

According to the Atlanta-based Centers for Disease Control, at least 1.2 million abortions are performed in the United States annually.

Advocates of RU-486, which blocks gestation of fertilized eggs in the uterus, say it would reduce the number of abortions. Pro-life groups, meanwhile, arguing that life begins at conception, called on Bush to ban the pill outright.

The American Life League urged Bush to "block the FDA's illicit approval of over-the-counter abortions."

"The morning-after pill causes the death of the embryonic person in the days between fertilization and implantation," said the organization's president, Judie Brown. "It accomplishes this by destroying the lining of the uterine wall, thus making it impossible for the new human person to attach. This leads to the death of the embryonic baby. This is abortion."

Brown contends that RU-486 would actually increase, rather than decrease, abortion rates. "The president should fulfill his promise to reduce the number of abortions in the United States by banning the morning-after pill," she said.

Carlton Veazey, president of the Religious Coalition for Reproductive Choice, meanwhile, said the FDA approval was long overdue.

Veazey said the coalition "stands unconditionally for a woman's right to choose according to her faith, conscience and personal circumstances and without government interference, as a principle of religious freedom as well as reproductive autonomy."

"We are hopeful that mifepristone will transform the struggle over legal abortion, by making the procedure more accessible and private and making it much harder for anti-choice extremists to identify women who are having the procedure and doctors who are providing it," Veazey added.

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Disability initiative offers matching funds to churches

By Kenny Byrd

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- President George W. Bush's recently announced initiative to build on the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990, would for the first time offer federal matching funds to houses of worship and private clubs that want to build wheelchair ramps, elevators and other access renovations.

According to an outline of the New Freedom Initiative provided by the White House, the Bush plan would provide annual federal matching grants to ADA-exempt organizations such as churches, to assist "in making sure their facilities are fully accessible to the disabled."

"Because all ADA-exempt organizations will be eligible for the grants, irrespective of whether they are religious or secular, they would comport with the Supreme Court's test for constitutional neutrality," the document goes on to say.

The White House did not respond to several calls made over a three-day period from Associated Baptist Press seeking specifics on the proposal.

But in announcing the plan at a recent White House event, Bush said: "In many houses of worship and civic centers, intentions are good, but resources are scarce. We can help make these community places open to all."

One church-state separation advocate raised concerns about the plan.

"This is a classic case of wanting your cake and eating it too," said Barry Lynn, executive director of Americans United for Separation of Church and State.

Lynn said churches fought efforts to force compliance with the ADA 11 years ago, saying whether to make their buildings handicap-accessible should be voluntary. "And now they come back wanting to have the structural improvements paid for with tax dollars," said Lynn, calling the proposal "a special privilege for religious groups."

Bush's father signed the disability act into law, and the new president said, "We are a better country for it."

The New Freedom Initiative, however, is "an important step in ensuring that all Americans with disabilities, whether young or old, can participate more fully in the life of their communities and of our country," he said.

The plan would, among other things, provide funds to assist the disabled with better access to high-priced technologies, such as text telephones, that would increase many people's ability to work and live more independently.

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Poll shows Americans support foreign aid to combat hunger

By Kenny Byrd

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- The number of Americans supporting a reduction of foreign aid has dropped and a new consensus is emerging in favor of U.S. aid to poor countries, according to a poll being touted by a leading Christian anti-hunger organization.

David Beckmann, president of Bread For the World, said the poll shows that Americans want their government to lead the way in reducing world hunger, and he has called on Congress and the Bush administration to take up the challenge.

The new poll, funded by the Rockefeller Foundation and conducted by the Program on International Policy Attitudes, found that Americans overwhelmingly favor using U.S. foreign aid to ease hunger and spur economic development in the world's poorest countries. It is one of the first comprehensive studies of American attitudes toward foreign aid since 1995, when PIPA last conducted a similar survey.

In its 1995 poll, PIPA found that 64 percent of the public wanted to cut foreign aid, while the new poll shows this number has fallen to 40 percent. Eighty-three percent of the public said that the United States should be willing to commit to a joint plan for cutting world hunger in half by the year 2015, and 70 percent of respondents rejected the notion that, "The U.S. has no vital interest in Africa."

The study included a nationwide poll of 901 randomly selected Americans as well as focus groups and a review of polling by other organizations, according to a press release from Bread For the World.

"The United States and other industrial nations have the resources and the know-how to cut world hunger in half by the year 2015," Beckmann said, pointing to the poll. "We have lacked only the political will. In this poll, Americans say they want to end hunger and are more than willing to pay their share."

He said that BFW will propose that Congress begin by approving an additional \$1 billion a year in effective, poverty-focused aid to Africa. That aid would include the next installment of U.S. funds for international debt relief, \$240 million for fiscal year 2002.

BFW is also urging Congress to focus on Africa "where hunger is most widespread and persistent," said Beckmann. Sub-Saharan Africa is the only region where hunger has more than doubled over the last 30 years. According to BFW. One of every three people there is chronically undernourished and 291 million people (as many as the entire U.S. population) live on less than \$1 a day.

Of those polled, 87 percent favored giving food and medical assistance to countries in need. Seventy-three percent favored U.S. aid to help poor countries develop their economies. And 75 percent said they would be willing to pay \$50 a year in taxes to cut world hunger in half.

BFW is a nonpartisan, 45,000-member Christian citizens' movement against hunger. Founded in 1974,

its members "lobby Congress and the administration to bring about public policy changes that address the root causes of hunger and poverty in the United States and overseas.

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Association stands to lose funds for not ousting gay-friendly churches

By Bob Allen

ATLANTA (ABP) -- The Georgia Baptist Convention and Southern Baptist Convention North American Mission Board have announced plans to withdraw funding from Atlanta Baptist Association over its refusal to expel two gay-friendly churches.

The Georgia convention's Administration Committee voted Feb. 6 to cut off immediately special-ministry funds for Atlanta Baptist Association and to recommend that the state's Executive Committee end all pastoral support and other funding effective Dec. 31.

Meeting Feb. 7, NAMB trustees voted unanimously to affirm a statement of support for the state convention's action a day earlier.

"The North American Mission Board will stand with the Georgia Baptist Convention, with whom it has an ongoing partnership, while attempting to minister to the association with grace," agency President Bob Reccord told trustees.

The related actions came in response to a Jan. 30 vote by Atlanta Baptist Association to continue to fellowship with Oakhurst Baptist Church in Decatur, Ga., and Virginia-Highland Baptist Church in inner-city Atlanta. The Georgia Baptist Convention ousted both congregations in 1999 for their welcoming-and-affirming stance toward gays.

The GBC Administration Committee said in a statement that the vote "places the Georgia Baptist Convention in the position of either affirming the decision of the Atlanta Baptist Association by its silence or taking action against the association."

"We urge the Atlanta Baptist Association to revisit their decision immediately," the GBC statement said. "It is our prayer that the association will recognize the clear statements of the Bible regarding homosexuality as sin and vote to withdraw fellowship from Oakhurst and Virginia-Highland."

The pastor of one of the disputed churches lamented the actions.

"It seems like they are determined to have a doctrinal uniformity," said Oakhurst pastor Lanny Peters. "That seems to be part of a trend in the Southern Baptist Convention right now."

The secret-ballot vote by Atlanta Association followed a nearly year-long process of dialogue prompted by a motion last spring to likewise disfellowship the congregations, which include gays and lesbians in all areas of church life.

In the end, however, the association voted 253-164 in favor of a membership-committee recommendation against expulsion. While the association doesn't "support or condone homosexual activity," the action stated, it "affirms the longstanding Baptist polity of local church autonomy."

Reccord, however, said there are boundaries to local church autonomy. "While local church autonomy is a cherished Baptist distinctive, there is a Baptist distinctive that supersedes it: the authority of Scripture and our accountability to it," he said.

The SBC constitution excludes from membership any churches that "affirm, approve or endorse homosexual behavior."

While Baptist associations are technically autonomous from their state convention and the SBC, they do receive funding from both through cooperative, joint-funding agreements.

Reccord said NAMB provides \$150,000 annually for nine positions in Atlanta Association, including directors of ministry centers, pastors and association staff.

Joel Harrison, Atlanta Association director of missions, said the loss of funds would immediately prevent the establishment of a proposed new staff position and the filling of an existing vacancy. He said it would also disqualify the association from receiving hunger-relief funds, which currently amount to about \$45,000 a year. The association also will not be able to request funds for new church starts.

In the long run, it would defund salaries for directors of two missions centers owned and operated by the association.

Harrison said the state convention and NAMB provide directly about \$75,000 of an association budget totaling about \$800,000.

"We will continue our work," Harrison said.

Asked if he thought the association might reconsider its decision regarding the two churches, Harrison said, "We're exploring avenues of seeing how we can work together in partnership."

Reccord indicated that NAMB would consider requests by affected individuals for transfer to a position outside Atlanta Association. "NAMB's actions have nothing to do with missionary personnel," he said.

The Georgia Baptist Administration Committee statement pointed out that it would continue to relate to nine other associations in the metropolitan Atlanta area. "Further, we will continue to relate to and work with those churches which choose to cooperate with the Georgia Baptist Convention."

Some of Atlanta Association's 153 churches are expected to defect over the controversial vote. If enough do, there is even talk of starting an alternative association in the two-county area that makes up the current association.

Oakhurst's Peters said he was not surprised by the negative reaction.

"I know that our congregation was concerned about the negative impact," Peters said. "But I'm also aware that it possibly could have had an impact the other way."

"There are people who were present [at the association's Jan. 30 meeting] who saw this as an indication of whether the association was going to respect the autonomy of the local church," he said.

"The association entered into what I thought was a healthy process of discernment," Peters said. "It was the kind of process that we had hoped for but never happened with the state convention."

Peters said that in contrast to the state convention, associational leaders came to his church for face-to-face communication. "It was Christian brothers and sisters sitting down together and discussing honest differences in biblical interpretation," Peters said. "To me, that's what we ought to be modeling for the world."

Peters noted that the association's membership committee was quick to distance itself from the churches' stance on homosexuality.

"They wanted to distance themselves from our theological position, but they wanted to respect the right of churches to interpret the Scripture for themselves and to minister according to God's calling."

But Georgia Baptist leaders said the association's vote amounted to a tacit endorsement of homosexuality. "Though the association released a statement that it does not condone homosexuality, the very decision of approving the two churches' practice defies that statement and places the association in the undeniable position of affirming the practice of homosexuality," their statement said.

NAMB official Reccord concurred. "It is hard to understand how the association can say they 'do not support or condone homosexual activity' yet maintain affiliation with churches that openly accept homosexuals as deacons and Sunday school teachers and support same-sex weddings," he said.

Oakhurst's Peters said if the association were willing to enforce agreement on the Bible's teaching on homosexuality, it would open the door for scrutiny on other issues as well.

"It isn't just this issue we don't have doctrinal uniformity on," Peters said. "What if the association came out with a policy on divorced pastors? I think Jesus had clear words to say about divorce."

In a statement he read at the Jan. 30 meeting of Atlanta Baptist Association, Peters said Oakhurst arrived at its pro-gay position "with integrity and a strong belief that the Spirit of God was leading us."

"This was the culmination of two decades of conversation, biblical study and reflection," he said.

NAMB's Reccord, meanwhile, said he believes the Bible is clear on the subject.

"We do not believe that the church can condone ongoing behaviors which the Scripture clearly labels as sin," Reccord said. "One role of the church in today's society is to serve as a conscience for the community even when it is uncomfortable and unpopular to do so."

"Some claim that even Christ forgave the woman caught in adultery," Reccord said, "but they conveniently forget that he also charged her to 'go and sin no more.'"

"We will do our best to hold to the clear precepts of Scripture and unhesitatingly stand on its teaching in the midst of a society that seems to fall for anything," he said.

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Coalition of nonprofits backs non-itemizer deductions

By Kenny Byrd

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- An organization representing more than 700 foundations and nonprofit organizations announced support for President George W. Bush's proposal to allow non-itemizers to deduct charitable donations from their income.

But the nonprofits coalition Independent Sector criticized the Bush proposal to repeal the estate tax, charging the move would "discourage charitable bequests."

Sara Melendez, president and CEO of Independent Sector, said Feb. 8 that while the organization "is encouraged by the inclusion of the charitable deduction for non-itemizers in the president's plan, we are concerned over the effect the proposed repeal of the estate tax could have to discourage charitable bequests.

"At a time when the need for increased giving is as great as ever, Congress and the new administration should ensure that strong incentives for charitable bequests continue," said Melendez.

"The non-itemizer deduction is a proposal that everyone can agree on," she said. "This proposal rightfully enjoys a prominent place in President Bush's tax package because it would inspire new donors, stimulate a surge in additional giving, increase tax fairness -- and it enjoys the widespread support of charities of all causes in every state."

Melendez said the plan would give approximately 85 million people who do not itemize on tax returns the same incentive and treatment as itemizers.

According to new research by PricewaterhouseCoopers for Independent Sector, the non-itemizer deduction would generate as much as \$14.6 billion in the first year in new giving and create 11 million new donors.

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